

Southern Sailing: On The Confederacy's Brief, Heroic Naval Academy

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Review

SOUTHERN SAILING

On the Confederacy's brief, heroic naval academy

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Campbell, R. Thomas *Academy on the James: The Confederate Naval School*.
Burd Street Press, ISBN 1572491302

The resources of the Southern Confederacy were pitifully small at the outset of the Civil War, and they dwindled steadily as the struggle ran its course. This was especially the case with the South's naval efforts. Lacking a fleet or any hope of building one, Confederate accomplishments were singular, piecemeal, and occasionally quite successful.

Such escapades are not in this book. Rather, R. Thomas Campbell's fourth volume on Confederate ventures at sea treats a little-known aspect: the naval college established midway through the war. Modeled after the U.S. Naval Academy and designed to train young men for junior-grade ranks, the school did its best with what it had at hand. Its saga was brief and undramatic, heroic but of limited value.

Campbell has pulled together all the bits and pieces obtainable for this story of the naval school. Diary excerpts are included if they were found; huge chunks of Superintendent William H. Parker's printed and well-known memoirs are incorporated. When a midshipman wrote an account of any isolated action or observation on naval life, it too is included.

Although Campbell attempts to follow a chronological path, lack of source material often leaves the chapters as individual and unconnected theses.

The school opened in November 1863. The "campus" was the C.S.S. *Patrick Henry*, anchored at Drewry's Bluff in the James River below Richmond. Fifty-two midshipmen composed the student body. Superintendent Parker naturally receives much attention. The top graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy

Class of 1847, Parker had the distinction of serving aboard both the U.S.S. *Merrimack* and the C.S.S. *Virginia* prior to taking charge of the young officers-to-be.

Following biographical sketches of other faculty members is a section devoted to the school-ship. Originally christened the *Yorktown*, the vessel was the *Patrick Henry* when she participated in the March 1862 naval battle of Hampton Roads. The side-wheeler remained in use as an academy until it burned in the evacuation of Richmond.

Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory receives deserved discussion. The innovative Floridian knew his fledgling navy would never be big enough to swap punches with the more established, greater-supplied U.S. Navy. So Mallory resorted to revolutionary weapons: ironclad ships, torpedoes (mines), tactical submarines, and the like.

There was a moment or two of drama for the midshipmen. In February 1864, eight of them were part of a raiding team that captured the U.S.S. *Underwriter* near New Bern, N.C. Three months later, 19 of the students joined the James River Squadron to contest Union General Benjamin F. Butler's army-navy advance up the river. Each naval group more or less bottled up the other. The midshipmen then returned to school until November, when all of the youngsters were ordered on active duty to assist hard-pressed Confederate forces. That was basically the end of the academy.

Campbell includes a number of appendices: a photo gallery of midshipmen, a roster of the academy, a list of midshipmen assigned while overseas, regulations for the naval school and of the *Patrick Henry*, plus other tidbits.

"The fact that the school existed at all is simply astounding," the author concludes. "Even more remarkable is the success that the school enjoyed in spite of the terrible war that raged around it. School boys one day, soldiers the next, and yet through it all, the Academy was able to train and graduate these boys as junior naval officers who were second to none. In fact, they were no doubt superior to many, for their classroom instruction had been supplemented by active operational experiences."

Campbell has sought earnestly to tell the academy's full story. Lack of sources blocked that objective. If the author occasionally relies too heavily on

lengthy quotations from printed sources, it was the result of an honest effort to make the chronicle as complete as possible. No question exists but that the fragments woven together here are the fullest account of the Confederate Naval Academy this age will ever see.

James I. Robertson, Jr., is author of Stonewall Jackson: The Man, The Soldier, The Legend and other books.